**Unlocking Whats Locked: Gawains Green Girdle**

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"Unlocking What's Locked: **Gawain**'s **Green** Girdle," in *Viator: Medieval and Renaissances Studies*, Vol. 14, 1983, pp. 289-302.

[In the following excerpt, Hanna explores the puropose and functions of the **green** girdle and the pentangle in ***Sir******Gawain*** *and the* ***Green******Knight***. ]

Modern understanding of ***Sir******Gawain*** *and the* ***Green******Knight*** has been advanced substantially by a distinguished series of articles on the **poem**'s symmetry. Central to this view of the **poem** stand those two objects most closely associated with the protagonist—the pentangle he bears on his red blazon and the **green** girdle which replaces it as his device late in the **poem**. The device on the shield, a sequence of lines carefully "locked" both geometrically and spatially, is poised against a strip of cloth which **Gawain** first sees "locked" about the lady's waist and then "unlocked" from it. The critical articles which have drawn out the connections between these objects have insisted carefully upon the relationship between the two implements as a sign of **Gawain**'s fault or fall: the promise of the shield is replaced by the guilt of the pentangle.

But in so describing the **poem**, these readings have attended more carefully to the less dynamic member of this duo, the pentangle. The shield description in the **poem** brims with everything readers take to be literary significance—it not only demands a careful reading but also delimits the nature of that reading. The poet elaborates a variety of relationships which the outlined star adumbrates, and these relationships have an explicit, a fixed and "locked" form which the star bodes. Moreover, identification of meaning here is public—the shield, after all, is a sign for those **Gawain** meets to read; and the poet insists on its status as an openly legible device:

Hit is a syngne that Salamon set sumquyle

In bytoknyng of trawthe, bi tytle that hit habbez ...

And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen

Oueral, as I here, the endeles knot ...

That is the pure pentaungel wyth the peple called

With lore.

These qualities of publicness and legibility control the kind of meaning the poet assigns **Gawain**'s blazon. The pentangle links and locks three discrete areas of experience, two of which the poet asserts as well known—the eternal value of truth and the pentangle as its fixed sign (according to the testimony of a famous biblical authority). Because **Gawain**'s personal habits and attainments correspond to the form of the device, and because, to pursue geometry a little further, things equal to the same thing are also equal to each other, **Gawain**'s unknown and untested personal qualities manifest the qualities of truth. Understandably, as a summary of **Gawain**'s claims for himself, the passage has attracted a rich and merited attention.

But in this process of reading, the other half of this central symmetry has been too often ignored. If the pentangle is a fixed emblem, the girdle is anything but delimited in its potential significance. Although it stands to the pentangle as failure to perfection, its significance remains slippery and equivocal. And that, presumably, is just the point of the **poem**: **Gawain** in his failure (however measured) finds himself inhabiting a world where the promise of perfection is distant indeed. The pentangle, the emblem of a world where meaning is clear and exemplary (if not locked to the point of rigidity), becomes replaced by an object, the girdle, to which meaning must be assigned. And after that point when **Gawain** accepts the belt from the lady, at least one major interest of the poet becomes the proliferation of possible meanings which might be assigned this strip of cloth. Characters and poet delight in conferring, qualifying, and denying significances. **Gawain**'s failure in the **poem** becomes his introduction to (or initiation into) a world where meaning is not an obvious reading-out of geometrical relationships but a slippery and chancy business. And this world is, of course, that inherent in the entire narrative—the world of magic where things may not be as they seem, where signs may not (as the pentangle does) represent transcendent signifieds.

To illustrate and elaborate this process, to explore the significance of the **green** girdle, I want to examine part of the process of according meanings to this object as it occurs in the last quarter of ***Gawain***. Although I will look at what I call "four versions of the girdle," I make no claim for this nomenclature as implying an exhaustive list and indeed remain conscious of a good many other obvious "versions" I might have suggested. I thus ignore such potential significances as: the girdle as simply a piece of **green** cloth with no inherent value; the girdle as a token of sexual conquest, and the girdle as illgotten goods taken wrongfully and responsible for a false confession. Although these senses are relevant and involve some very interesting problems unlike those I shall discuss, their analysis would form a supererogatory critical gesture: limiting myself to four versions of the girdle explicitly suggested by the characters will be sufficient for my purposes.

These four "versions" are adequate because they illustrate three major features of the endeavor of finding meaning in the girdle. First, the very existence of a variety of projected readings of the girdle indicates a world where significance is moot and debatable, unlike that world implied by the pentangle. Moreover, since I believe that logically no two of these interpretations can be simultaneously correct as stated, this world is one which demands judgment, the poising and evaluation of conflicting claims to "truth." Second, in this situation all interpretations begin to appear fragile and tentative; they are personalized, a reflection of dramatic situation and point of view. Meaning in some measure ceases to be an identification or intuition of some idealized and exemplary sense of the "real"; it becomes the effort of a limited perceiver to draw conclusions from experience. Third, in multiplying possible significances of the girdle, the poet directly involves the reader in that process of adjudicating meanings which the **poem** describes. Like our contact with all **poems**, we as readers respond to ***Gawain*** serially: from the moment we begin to read, we intuit meaning and attempt to perceive the author's intended sense. We come, as we proceed, to certain hypotheses about what is important in the **poem** and to hypotheses interrelating these various leading ideas. Near the end of ***Gawain***, when we first see the **green** girdle, we think we have a clear sense of what is at issue in the **poem**. But this meaning that we have intuited the poet quite deliberately seeks to obscure. Issues we had thought settled become unclear; that fragility and tentativeness which I have associated with various readings of the girdle by the characters become part of our reading experience as well. Rather than clarifying the **poem**'s issues, the climax of **Gawain**'s adventure makes that very problem of evaluation and interpretation with which the characters are involved the center of our reading experience.

Version 1 of the girdle, the lady's claim that it has magical properties, epitomizes certain attributes of all the potential meanings assigned the girdle. All these "definitions" share two features: they are not susceptible to any validation, and any reading against the narrative events of the **poem** confuses issues that have seemed clearly explained elsewhere. These qualities measure the extent of **Gawain**'s failure, his descent from the emblematic world of the pentangle into one of opinion and uncertainty....

Although explicitly not a jeweled ring (and not even especially rich in ornament), the belt, to **Gawain**'s thinking, becomes momentarily a thing of gemlike value. And far from visualizing his activity as that of the disciplined and codebound pentangle **knight**, **Gawain** now sees his hope as "slipping," as escaping from the locked organization of his blazon into some other realm of action. Further, nobility becomes no longer the attribute of a warrior **knight** but of *sletht*, "trickery." The degree to which the protagonist has already entered a world of slipperiness is measured both by the embarrassing rhyme *knyght*: *sleight* and by the fact that **Gawain**, for once in bedroom duel, has surrendered his own language for the lady's terminology, if not her perspective. And even before he has accepted her offer, **Gawain** has fallen prey to the lady's suggestiveness: his acceptance of her terms indicates both a willingness to take as somehow true what is not experiential and in excess of available fact (the girdle is no jewel), and, insofar as experience is at issue, to treat it from an evaluative but potentially nonidealistic perspective (in which such oxymora as "noble slethtes" are possible verbal constructions....

The girdle is a device of power, one that renders its bearer invulnerable, but most especially (and appropriately) invulnerable to dismemberment, *tohewynge*. This claim of magical potency is apparently validated in the **poem** by **Gawain**'s survival: although not unscathed, he is not *tohewen*.

As every reader knows, however, things in ***Gawain*** are not quite so simple. Making the girdle into the token of salvation accords to it a unique causal role in the narrative: it, and it alone, is the proximate cause of the hero's living through the experience. But, as all readers know, causality (even literary causality) is potentially far more complicated than this reading suggests. Moreover, if the girdle ensures **Gawain**'s safety in danger, the reader must reject the force of important pieces of the narrative: if the girdle is causally coercive on the acts at the **Green** Chapel, neither the symmetry of the **Green** **Knight**'s feints, nor the skill of his axwielding, nor his explanations of having stagemanaged the entire scene (a claim that he controls the girdle rather than it him) can be allowed any real effect. From this point of view, the girdle as causal factor competes with other, perhaps more proximate, causal possibilities, and choosing to identify it as the magic object responsible for the action, thus validating the meaning assigned by the lady, begins to appear capricious at best.

An additional issue should prove yet more unsettling: adopting with any seriousness that magical significance the lady assigns the girdle forces the reader to challenge ideas which he takes as givens of the **poem**. If one accepts that the girdle represents some magic power which allows **Gawain** to elude that physical harm for which he has contracted, one must hold in abeyance what seems one of the **poem**'s most basic and explicit *donnees*. In the **poem** the girdle must then function in at best an oxymoronic fashion (cf. *noble sletht*). Rather than a thing which magically dissolves a situation of expected death, the girdle is that thing in the **poem** which brings **Gawain** into gravest danger, which provokes the possibility of death. Accepting the girdle does not allow **Gawain** to elude physical correction; indeed, it is the single act which makes it most apparent that he must be corrected. If one accepts the lady's identification and uses it to read the **poem**, the girdle becomes both the magical thing by which **Gawain** is sustained in life and what most thoroughly threatens his life. It is possible to resolve this dilemma quickly by saying that the lady either lies or is mistaken. But it seems to me wrong to do so, or to do so without pause: the persistence of this kind of dilemma as the **poem** nears its conclusion indicates that the poet emphasizes such problems deliberately. Thus the reader must, at a minimum, recognize that he has faced and tried to adjudicate contradictory views.

Version 2 of the girdle holds a particularly central place in the literature about ***Gawain***, and, indeed, is often taken as if it were the only effort in the **poem** to assign a significance to the **green** belt....

**Gawain**, angrily discomfited at being caught in his trick, here names what he takes to be his sins. Later he imposes these identifications upon the girdle: it becomes the sign of the failure of his quest, explicitly in terms of these sins. Like the lady, who asserts a magic power which gives the girdle value, **Gawain** also attempts to name that value resident in the object, to render it significant within his experience. Unlike the lady's identification, and much more in the spirit of Versions 3 and 4, **Gawain**'s claim represents a variety of symbolic reading. But one has to understand such symbol-making as not at all susceptible to standards of validity. There is no inevitable connection between a symbol and its referent (signs are generally arbitrary), and the only measure of validity is public acceptance, whereby the symbol enters usage and passes current. But it should not surprise the reader that the poet has gone out of his way to suggest the peculiarly arbitrary quality of **Gawain**'s reading.

If the reader accepts **Gawain**'s identification of the girdle as a sign of covetousness and cowardice, some very serious difficulties in interpretation result. If **Gawain** is cowardly or covetous, then these words cannot mean in the **poem** what they normally mean in Middle English, and the literary portrayal cannot be analyzed in any straightforward way. The poet is explicit in his view that **Gawain** does not take the girdle for reasons at all associated with avarice: accepting **Gawain**'s view that the girdle represents such an avaricious proclivity flatly conflicts with direct narrative statement.

The case against branding **Gawain** a coward is similar, though more difficult. Although **Gawain** clearly takes the girdle "for to sauen hymself" and although he flinches once at a proffered blow, his pusillanimousness is of a minor and muted sort. Both bearing the girdle and flinching become less than adequate demonstrations of cowardice in the context of Part IV where **Gawain** performs, if anything, with a valor far beyond the ordinary. He could, after all, accept the guide's offer and flee; he could, even later, be overcome by the theatrical eeriness of the **Green** Chapel and **Green** **Knight**'s appearance: he could flinch a second time, rather than upbraid the **Green** **Knight** for toying with him; he could be considerably less plucky and sensitive to the possibility of divine protection. To assert bluntly, as **Gawain** does, that he is a cowardly failure misses much of the narrative dedicated to defining a figure not cowardly at all. The reader must find **Gawain**'s creation of symbolic readings for the girdle just as problematic as the lady's claim for its magical powers....

The **knight**'s blood, sign both of his guilty mortality and (because he is unaccountably alive to see it) his vital force regained, stains the blank field about him. The powerful evocation of rebirth, a newfound possibility, is balanced against the wilderness snowfield—a *tabula rasa* on which **Gawain** must learn to write what he (not the world) now is. This scene may come as close to an adequate reading of the girdle as any: an unexamined vitality, apparently valued for itself, yet undefined and not clearly reflecting whatever values produced its pursuit.

Version 3 of the girdle is promulgated by the **Green** **Knight**:

And I gif the, **sir**, the gurdel that is golde-hemmed;

For hit is grene as my goune, **Sir** Gawayn, the maye

Thenk vpon this ilke threpe, ther thou forth thryngez

Among prynces of prys, and this a pure token

Of the chaunce of the grene chapel at cheualrous knythtez.

Just as **Gawain** has done, the **Green** **Knight** attempts a symbolic reading, in which the girdle should be construed (with the **Green** **Knight** showing greater awareness than **Gawain** that symbolic readings achieve validity only as they achieve public acceptance) as a sign of the chivalric adventure in which **Gawain** has been involved. Just as **Gawain**'s reading, this effort is not validated within the **poem**; just as **Gawain**'s identification, it affects and is affected by the reading of the **poem**. The two symbolic efforts differ, however, in manner: **Gawain**'s reading, in a justifiably self-centered effort at finding significance in failure, overelaborates the girdle; the **Green** **Knight**, dialectically, minimizes its significance. The girdle becomes, in his rendering, merely another trophy for a Camelot display case, and this typically **Green** Knightish matter-of-factness creates difficulties for the reader.

Identifying the girdle as simply the "token" of a chivalric adventure reduces and qualifies one basic assumption of any reading, that girdle and pentangle are significant objects in some poised relationship. The **Green** **Knight**'s reading creates different and unsettling balances in the literary relations of the **poem**. In his telling, the girdle becomes less like the pentangle and more like the ax of Part I, both implements associated with the quest, the one a sign of its acceptance, the other of its achievement. In these terms, the **Green** **Knight**'s reading gains further support as demonstrating a link between the two halves of the **poem**'s double plot. As the ax reflects the beheading game, the girdle becomes a sign of the private testing **Gawain** has undergone in his bedchamber. This reading renders the second plot a symmetrical and balanced portion of **Gawain**'s experience.

But reading ***Gawain*** this way will surely not appeal to most, for such an interpretation flattens the **poem**'s significance. What readers take to be the supreme testing of the superlative Round Table **knight** becomes in the **Green** **Knight**'s handling merely one of innumerable Arthurian adventures. Just as **Gawain** senses himself the center of his world, the most important person he knows, and tries to construct a significant version of his experience, readers of the **poem** desire a peculiar and special significance, in the **poem** conveyed by the shield and its coat of arms.

From such a perspective, the **Green** **Knight**'s sense of significance exhibits the same personalized quality as **Gawain**'s treatment of the girdle. For the **Knight**, however appreciative of **Gawain**'s virtues he may be, all Arthur's men are "bot berdlez chylder": significance for them is established merely by contact with him. Moreover, for him, **Gawain**'s shield has none of those resonances of **Gawain**'s personal history which the poet explains to the reader; in their contact, where **Gawain** performs only as houseguest and passive recipient of his blow, the shield lacks function. For a reader determined to see the **poem** as exhibiting **Gawain**'s unique significance, this symbolic reading will seem easy to reject. But the **Green** **Knight**'s view of the girdle is part of a larger pattern and shares with other versions that power to force the reader to examine significance, to assess potential meanings.

The fourth reading of the girdle is introduced in the closing lines, yet remains the only one which achieves any general currency in the **poem**:

The kyng comfortez the knytht, and alle the court als

Lathen loude therat, and luflyly acorden

That lordes and ladis that longed to the Table,

Vche burne of the brotherhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,

A bende abelef hym aboute of a brytht grene,

And that, for sake of that segge, in swete to were.

The members of the Round Table define (and aggressively assert their definition of) the **green** girdle as a sign of their human complicity and sympathy, their fellowship with the discomfited **Gawain**. The badge, especially in the mood of hilarity with which it is created, the laughter which greets **Gawain**'s overly dire confession of failure, becomes the inverse of the sign **Gawain** intended. Rather than a badge of grief and shame, the girdle now betokens courtly civility, that mirth and courtesy which binds the Round Table. This signification is explicitly designed to reject the moralistic obduracy and naive despair of Version 2.

Yet although it passes current at the end of the **poem**, even gaining an ironic historical validity by notice in "the best boke of romaunce," this interpretation seems as qualified as the **poem**'s other assays at assigning meaning to the girdle. First, the reading is created in a clear dramatic context which underscores the capriciousness and self-indulgence of its making. As an act, assigning to the girdle the implications of good fellowship is designed to have an effect—the reintegration of **Gawain** into chivalric society, the cessation of his moralistic moping over his failure. Meaning here is centered entirely in context and situation and carries with it that fortuitousness which seems inevitably to hover about jests.

Moreover, this reading resembles the **Green** **Knight**'s in its denial of significance to an experience the reader has felt to be significant. As a positive gesture, of course, the fellowship of the Round Table means to indicate to **Gawain** that he is no worse than they, that he is overly morbid about the discovery of his faulted humanity. But in making this claim the members of the Round Table create dissonances similar to those I have analyzed earlier. The generalization of the girdle as heraldic badge indicates a community of experience, but **Gawain**'s experience the Round Table has not shared. Indeed earlier its members suggested that to undertake the quest was folly. Further, in defining the girdle as they choose, the courtiers deny that most unique, and for the reader most significant, aspect of **Gawain**'s adventure—his effort at self-discovery. Whatever else it may indicate, **Gawain**'s shame, which the Round Table finds so unsettlingly risible that it must attempt to dissipate it, reflects the protagonist's sense that his experience is something to be learned from, a reminder of past misperception of his human nature. This possibility, which most readers take to be of considerable import, the Round Table interpretation of the girdle severely truncates.

All four efforts at according significance to the girdle, then, seem problematic insofar as they create potential disruptions in the meaning of the **poem**. In the characters' persistent effort to assert meaning, they manage only to draw the reader's attention to the difficulty of defining both what the girdle is and what **Gawain**'s acceptance of it signifies. And that is, of course, the major point. The pentangle promises a world where Trawthe is a primary value, where identity is secure, and where unity defines a real relationship. Once **Gawain** fails by accepting a girdle he does not intend to exchange, he has denied his identity as previously constituted, has ceased to be the **knight** of Trawthe. His world becomes filled with the possibility of mistake, illusion, or magic, a place where values lack that clarity they had before. This world is not one where truths may be identified but one where they must be read out, intuited and interpreted, or read in, imposed. The poet's insistent creation of interpretive situations for both characters and reader forms a designed emphasis, a requirement that the reader apprehend the difficulty of such a world, one more significantly like the reader's own than like Camelot.

Another way of saying the same thing is to draw attention to the **poem**'s repeated description of acts involving exchange. Generally, up to the point when **Gawain** accepts the girdle, exchange always appears to be even in practice; although the objects swapped (a kiss and venison steaks, for example) may differ in terms of market value, the covenanted rules of exchange games seem to imply that getting a bad deal is undone by the fun of playing the game. Because of the leveling activity of mirth, this system can be visualized as one in which objects all become roughly equivalent through the courtliness with which they are offered and accepted. But **Gawain**'s retention of the girdle breaks the equivalence structure and introduces a more deceptive, yet potentially more hardminded, standard, that of valuation. Keeping the girdle is the act of determining that one priority (saving one's neck) should deserve more attention than another (playing an exchange game); thus the girdle becomes too valuable to be returned. To say this is to indicate that **Gawain**'s consciousness of fault is merely a belated discovery of what has always been present but unclear to him. **Gawain**'s quest-centeredness has obscured for him the extent to which he has depended upon conventional signification (the pentangle, for example) rather than perceiving its potential limits as a purely human construction.

In pursuing this theme, the ***Gawain***-poet is, of course, at one with his great contemporaries. Similar examinations of the power of the transcendent and of its distance from the awkward muddle of human affairs so typify the works of other Ricardian writers that those themes I have been discussing in ***Gawain*** may define one major interest of a literary period. In works such as *The Canterbury Tales, Piers Plowman*, and *Mandeville's Travels*, other leading authors of the late fourteenth century show an abiding interest in such difficulties....

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